

Words

Psalm 19; John 7:14-24

In the adaptation of George Bernard Shaw's 'Pygmalion', the musical 'My Fair Lady' has the heroine, Eliza Doolittle, singing, "Words, words, words, I'm so sick of words, I get words all day through..."

We live in a world where words predominate. Good words and bad words. Facebook and Twitter, email and a few of us still send proper letters with stamps and envelopes. Words from our televisions and radios, computers and electronic devices. Words on our phones as people seem to be talking to everyone all of the time on buses and trains, in cars and on the street. Do you remember the old BT advert that told us that, "It's good to talk", but in the present day I wonder if we are ever silent long enough to listen. There is little point in talking if there is no one taking the time to listen.

Then there is the issue about what we are saying and communicating to those around us. Paul tells us in his First Letter to the Corinthians, that, "Evil communications corrupt good manners." James in his Letter tells us to watch our tongues and what we say.

Words and how we use them can make or break relationships, business deals, political commitments, economic strategies and foreign policy. During World War Two the United States Office of War Information ran a publicity campaign that intoned, "Loose Lips Sink Ships", a warning against careless talk that might pass on information useful to the enemy.

What we say, and how we say it, often says a lot more about us than it does about the people we are talking to, or the topics we are talking about.

In 2014 when Scotland was enthralled with or embroiled in the Independence Referendum, the Very Revd Dr John Chalmers launched a series of events in conjunction with others under the heading of 'respectful dialogue'. How do we, whoever we are, whatever our position or role in society, use responsible words when we talk to each other about things that matter. How do we find ways, through words, and maybe silence, to come to an agreement or to disagree well?

As people of faith, how do we talk to each other and about each other on matters about which we agree and disagree? Global warming and how we care for creation; immigration and the plight of refugees; the ongoing debate about same-sex relationships; how we address the scandals of poverty and homelessness; what we do about arguing for better funding for resources for people with poor mental health; how we tackle food-justice. Will people know that we are Christians by the words we choose to speak, and then by the actions we choose to take?

The Bible tells us that there is a time for speech and a time for silence. We should use our words, and our silences, well.

I've been an ordained minister of 35 years and am very conscious that Dr Fegan is not even a week old in his new ministry here. Be kind to him in these early days, or I shall send battalions of Morningside Matrons over the Bridge to sort you!

In those 35 years with virtually every sermon I have preached I have started it with the words from Psalm 19: "Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in Thy sight, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer." When I preach, when Conor preaches, when any minister opens their mouths to speak in a service, we want our words to matter.

Not for us, as individuals, to matter, we're not the important ones. But for our *words* to matter. So that what we say in sermons, or in prayers, or in talks to the young ones, gives us all something to think about, something to respond to; something to agree with, or disagree with; something to take home and chew over. And maybe, just maybe, something to change and transform your life. Words.

Our words are like deeds. They shape things and shift things. Words can harm; or heal. Words can depress; or enliven. We should remember that we not only speak word;; we should live by them. Which is fine if your words are kindly, compassionate, and positive. What have you been saying, lately? It's not just preachers that have to watch what they say, it's all of us. It's you! It's like the Dutch clergyman Henri Nouwen wrote:

"Did I offer peace today? Did I bring a smile to someone's face? Did I say words of healing? Did I let go of my anger and resentment? Did I forgive? Did I love? These are the real questions. I must

trust that the little bit of love that I sow now will bear many fruits, here in this world and the life to come."

Our words, along with our thoughts and our actions are smaller pieces of God's intricate universe. Our words, along with our thoughts and actions, might very well help us to tell the glory of God, like Psalm 19 sings. Or our words, along with our thoughts and actions, might teach the people around us something about the goodness and wonder and excitement of God, like Jesus was doing in the Temple of Jerusalem. And was challenged for doing it.

Our words matter. It matters what we say, and what we don't say. Winston Churchill said, "We are masters of the unsaid words, but slaves of those we let slip out." What words have you left unsaid? What words are you glad you've said out loud, or wished you'd never spoken?

What have you been saying these last few days? And how have you been saying your words? I will never know. Your new minister may never know. But you know. And God will know.

One final thought. For all that I am saying what is the point of all our words if there is no one to listen?

Mother Teresa of Calcutta was being interviewed by a journalist about her life and faith. At one point the interviewer asked her what she said to God when she prayed. "I don't say anything," she replied. "I just listen." "And when you listen", said the interviewer, "what does God say?" "He doesn't say anything", she replied, "He just listens."

Yes, by all means speak, use the words. Our faith is about words. But it is also about our silence, our listening. Beneath the weighty words, and the inconsequential chatter, we need to create a kind of silence of the soul. We need to speak, but we need to learn to listen. That is true communication. That is staying in touch with each other, and with God. Words and listening; speaking and silence. Our words shape our world, and the listening silence that should accompany our speech give our words meaning.

Maybe we should all be taking a leaf out of Psalm 19, and start each day with this:

"Let the words of our mouths and the meditation of our hearts be acceptable in Thy sight, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer."

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit Amen